

2001

# Rescue and the War Story

William I. Miller

*University of Michigan Law School, [wimiller@umich.edu](mailto:wimiller@umich.edu)*

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles/739>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles>



Part of the [Law and Psychology Commons](#), and the [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Miller, William I. "Rescue and the War Story." *Law Quad. Notes* 44, no. 1 (2001): 64-7. (Excerpted from *The Mystery of Courage*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000.)

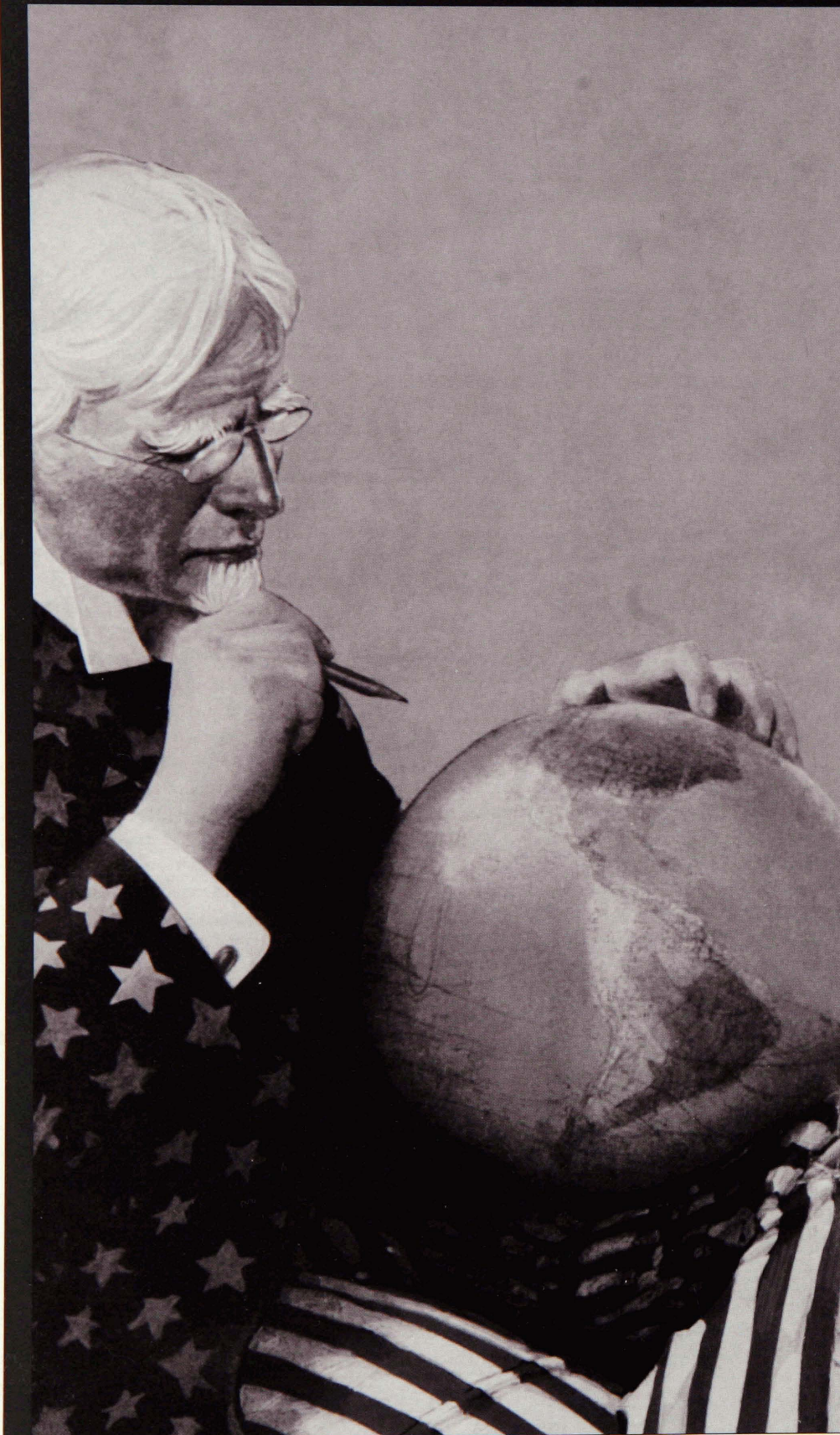
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [mlaw.repository@umich.edu](mailto:mlaw.repository@umich.edu).



# RESCUE

*&*  
the  
war  
story

— BY WILLIAM IAN MILLER





The following excerpt is from *The Mystery of Courage*, published in fall 2000 by Harvard University Press. Reprint here is by permission.

It is precisely in the domain of rescue that twentieth-century battle has made its peculiar addition to the styles of the heroic. Our war stories often become rescue stories even when they start out as efforts in the old genre, sometimes, it seems, in spite of themselves. The film *Saving Private Ryan* thus ineptly shifts from a powerful representation of a very particular Normandy invasion to a general story of a rescue mission that could have been situated anywhere. It is in World War I that stretcher-bearers get Victoria Crosses and in Vietnam that medics get their Medals of Honor. General Birdwell, for instance, Anzac commander in the Great War, said that if he had thousands of Victoria Crosses to hand out he would give them all to stretcher-bearers. Nearly one-third of Vietnam Medal of Honor citations allege some kind of rescue purpose, either centrally as in the case of medics and helicopter pilots, or as a motive adding further luster to grand charges and defenses in the conventional style. Admittedly, in the Vietnam War, because of the peculiarities of American strategy, rescue figured more prominently as a standard part of operations than it did in the pitched territorial battles of the world wars and Korean campaigns, but Vietnam simply continues a trend already well established earlier in the century. The virtue of those assigned the task of rescue — medics and stretcher-bearers — rises, it seems, as war becomes more nearly total, so that informal truces to gather in the wounded get harder to establish.

In the Civil War, the Medal of Honor was more likely to be awarded for recovering the regiment's colors; and one who stopped in the midst of a charge to aid a fallen companion was liable to be accused of cowardice or, if serving under Stonewall Jackson, to be executed; the helper was seen to be trolling for a morally worthy excuse to justify not going forward. Abner Small (in *The Road to Richmond*,



Harold Adams Small, ed., University of California Press, 1939) tells of another soldier of suspect courage at Fredericksburg, this one, however, blessed with very strong legs:

In company F was a soldier named Oliver Crediford, a large man, of great physical strength. A fellow soldier named Levi Barker fell wounded, and Crediford picked up Barker and started for the rear.

"Crediford!" the captain shouted. "Come back into the ranks! Leave that man where he is!"

"Cap'n," he shouted back, "you must think I'm a damn fool to let Barker die here on the field."

He kept on going and was seen no more in the battle. If he kept his head to save his skin, I suspect he was the only man that did.

But within 50 years not stopping to rescue begins to require some justification. When R.H. Tawney abandons a wounded man at the Somme he suspects his own motivation for moving forward: "I hate touching wounded men — moral cowardice, I suppose. One hurts them so much and there's so little to be done. . . . So I left him. He grunted again angrily, and looked at me with hatred as well as pain in his eyes. It was horrible." Cowardice either way, but with a clear sense that the failure to rescue requires some excuse beyond merely alleging the duty to continue moving forward. Frederick Manning captures nicely the resentment the men

start to feel when an order not to stop to aid a stricken comrade is issued the night before going over the top. The troops find it evidence of the callousness of the rear echelon to their plight. Says one character: "The bloody fool that wrote that letter [ordering them not to stop to help the wounded] doesn't seem to know what any ordinary man would do in the circumstances. We all know that there must be losses, you can't expect to take a trench without some casualties; but they seem to go on from saying that losses are unavoidable, to thinking that they're necessary, and from that, to thinking that they don't matter." Still, the motives of someone not specifically assigned the duty of rescue remained suspect when he halted his advance to aid a stricken comrade. There was a difference between coming in from danger to escort a wounded man to safety and going out to pull him in. Thus the wry voice of an officer on the Marne: "A few slightly wounded men approached, each attended by two or three solicitous friends. . . . These willing helpers were gently pushed back into the fray."

By casting our heroic stories as narratives of rescue are we arguing for a kinder heroic ethic, life-saving rather than life-destroying? Are we witnessing the democratizing of courage and the heroic on the battlefield as we saw courage earlier expanding to include the constant, patient, and persevering? Medics need have no special physical attributes or martial skills. Indeed they are every man or could be every woman, and as such they hold for all of us the possibility of grand action, even if we do not have the body of Ajax or the ability to kill other human beings when it is in our best interests to do so.

Who, after all, got assigned to these rescue details but the worst shots, the meek, the gentle, the miserably unmartial, the musicians, those, that is, whose bodies and style did not predict the usual kind of courageous soul? Take for example this portrait of Corporal Side:

*Continued on page 66*



*Continued from page 65*

Side is a remarkable soldier. He looks less like a soldier than any man I have seen in France, and that is saying a good deal. He is short, cross-eyed, bandy-legged, and has a preference for boots and clothes sizes too big for him. In civil life I believe he is a rag picker, and the character of his profession adheres, as it will, to the man. He joined the battalion two years ago as a stretcher-bearer, and on the first of July carried stretchers under fire continuously for twenty-four hours. Anyone who knows the weight of a loaded stretcher and remembers the heat, the condition of the ground, and what the firing was like upon that day, will agree with me that the Victoria Cross would have expressed rather less than Side's deserts. However, he for his bravery was promoted to full corporal in the fighting ranks.

These jobs required more exposure to fire than even the fighting men faced. The medic, as more than one Medal of Honor citation reveals, must hold up the plasma bag in the free-fire zone. Stretcher-bearers must suppress all urges to hit the deck amidst exploding shells, lest they kill their cargo. And each time they come out, they must muster the will to go back into the inferno for another load.

Part of the explanation for the rise of the heroics of rescue is more homely, I think. Rescue comes to dominate as the style of mechanized warfare allows for less opportunity for individual heroic acts in the old style. The distances separating combatants increase; opportunities for glorious charges and single combat become rarer, and in the case of Vietnam there were very few conventional battles to generate conventional heroics. The only humans seeking immediate attention, who can look you in the eye, are comrades to aid, not enemies to kill, for these have become invisible. In the conditions of mass dehumanizing warfare, the rescuer and

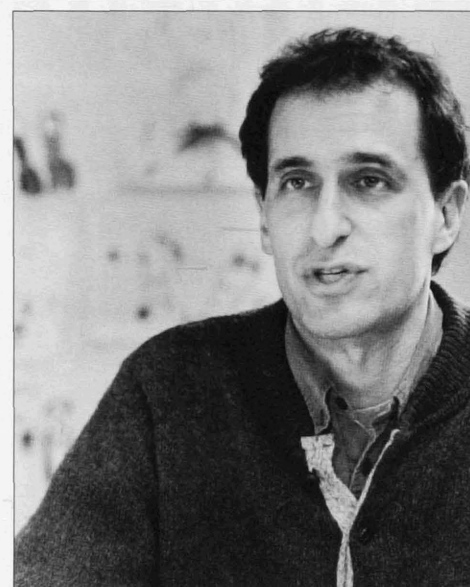
indeed the rescued are rehumanized, reindividualized. Rescue also becomes more rational, in spite of the irrational obsession with it, when medical care rises to a level at which the wounded are likely to survive if saved, although that hardly explains the rescue of corpses, as ancient a motive for grand action as there might be.

Rescue involves special rules; it is almost as if it touched on something as deeply instinctual as self-preservation; thus, Robert Graves says a soldier would run a 1.0 risk of death to save a life, even 1 in 20, in certain circumstances, to pull in a wounded enemy. Rescue has a magical power to motivate action. John Keegan notes how difficult it is to get armies to overcome the inertia that self-protection imposes without recourse to some higher object than holding ground or getting new ground to hold: "That higher object is the rescue of comrades in danger." Some have suggested that there is a basic human need to help as much as there is a basic need for help.

The special nobility of rescue seems to immunize it from certain contingencies of success or failure. The glory of the medic who rushes out to save a man who is beyond saving is not tarnished by the ultimate futility of the deed. Whether the practical goal is accomplished or not bears no relation to the worthiness of the risk undertaken. Not so the courage of attack, and to a somewhat lesser extent, defense. There the merit of the deed is tied up in some quite complex way with the success or failure of the enterprise, with its practical purpose. More medals are thus awarded for deeds that lead to victory than for equally grand action that has the misfortune to take place in the context of a general defeat. Glorious defeat is a rather narrow category; most defeats are clouded in suspicions that the general level of courage was not sufficient to the demands of the situation. Going down grandly in defeat is delicately contingent on several key variables that mark the thinnest difference separating glorious failure from dark comedy.

To risk life to give life or comfort seems to have a special motivating power for soldiers, who must welcome the

opportunity to have their courage manifest in something other than the destruction of life. The ascendance of the rescue narrative can be seen as the continuing expansion of courage into kinder areas even if such kindness takes place in an inferno of shellfire. But so to shift courage's terrain may also transform, if not utterly then at least subtly, courage's substance and inner life. Philip Caputo in a eulogy to his friend Levy, who died trying to rescue a man who was "beyond saving" makes Levy all that is



**William I. Miller**, the Thomas G. Long Professor of Law, holds a Ph.D. (in English) and a J.D. from Yale University. He has written extensively on the blood feud, especially as it is manifested in saga Iceland. In the last few years he has turned his attention to the emotions of social and moral stratification and most recently to at least one virtue — courage, which provides the theme of his latest book: *The Mystery of Courage* (Harvard University Press, 2000). Other books include *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Harvard University Press, 1997) (chosen best book in anthropology/sociology by the Association of American Publishers); *Humiliation* (Cornell University Press, 1993; paperback 1995); and *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (University of Chicago Press, 1990).



courage and sacrifice: "Yours was the greater love. You died for the man you tried to save." Caputo, bitterly and in a way that recalls Christ doubting whether his father had forsaken him, has Levy die *pro patria*. "It was not altogether sweet and fitting, your death, but I'm sure you died believing it was *pro patria*. You were faithful. Your country is not." Rescue makes battle become the place for courage as an imitation of Christ, dying to save others, in which courage becomes love, but without Christ's knowledge that he held the winning hand, more than an imitation then, a true surpassing.

Part of the unfathomability of this soldierly greater love is that his self-sacrifice is not for a friend, but for a comrade. There's a difference. Friendship, according to one soldier, "implies rather more stable conditions" than comradeship, which seems to be characterized by "a spontaneous and irreflective action . . . at one moment a particular man may be nothing at all to you, and the next minute you will go through hell for him. No, it is not friendship." Another wonders at the mystery of the soldier who "will rescue a wounded man under heavy fire to whom an hour before he would have refused to lend sixpence." Comradeship arises in a field of pain and misery and is largely bounded by it: friendship occupies softer and more pleasant terrain. Friendships can exist for a lifetime without ever having the issue of such ultimate sacrifice be any more than a dimly and romantically imagined hypothetical. Soldierly comradeship, in contrast, exists primarily against a backdrop of shared misery or danger. Like courage, comradeship is mysterious, or just baffling, in a way that friendship is not.

